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Philosophy of Education

America's education system can sometimes appear to be choking on systemization, and more systems for education seem to come out all the time. "Understanding by Design", "Differentiated Instruction", "Core Knowledge" and "Mass Customized Learning" and others have come out. They are not usually mutually exclusive, making the array of options for teachers seem limitless, and they probably are. Having never completely left America's educational thought, but making a resurgence, is the idea of education is something that does not, and should not, happen primarily between the walls of a single building. Learning is the essential process of human life, and so to take outside the context of our normal everyday lives is ridiculous. That is a statement most teachers could agree with, but some have now started to take the idea to its outer limits: Sometimes their classroom is a bunch of desks, but often it is a farm field, a carpenter's shop, the voting place, or the town hall. These kinds of teachers are not just back-to-the-landers, but also social activists who put social ills the focus of their lesson plans. It is this brand of educational reform that I have found myself drawn to.

While my views on education and technological are very much neo-Luddite, my life story up until my going to college wouldn't exactly point in that direction. While I was born in Louisiana, and lived there for the first six-years of my life, my mother's family was from Maine, and I grew up here most of my life. Most of the time, I was doing what kids were expected and allowed to do: I played video games for a while before I sold them all, watched TV (History Channel, especially), read and

listened to music. I didn't join a sports team, or do any crafts. I didn't have a job until my last summer as a high school student. But I did learn something about the wonders of nature. My Aunt Christine and Uncle Joe's home, who raised me when while I was in Maine, was on the Piscataquis River and one of its deltas. I would take hours long hikes there in the fall and dead of winter, even in blizzards. I even once damned up a small creek and raised the water level by a foot or so. I found a beaver's home by walking across its iced over pond. It was a magical place for me.

The culture I grew up in both led me to education and made it so that my philosophy of education would be very different from those around me. I was surrounded by history and reminders of the past. I listened, and learned to recite by heart, dozens of stories from my aunts, uncles and grandparents. I was a direct descendent of Ezekial Chase, the first white settler in Piscataquis County, where I grew up. I was a ten minute drive from many of my Chase relatives' graves. As Faulkner said, "The past is not forgotten. It is not even past."

I was raised around those who had issues with drug dependence, most of whom were at least in and out of recovery by the time I was born. AA and its culture had a huge influence on my family. That experience helped inoculate me when I became an adult, from messages from the government, Hollywood and others. While the recovery story that usually becomes a bestseller is that of an alcoholic who makes a big turn-around and goes stone-dry (and if they don't, that always leads to failure), I saw how the reality was usually much more complicated and nuanced. Success and recovery could come in many different forms.

There was something else I observed: the extreme poverty of the people in my community, and the fact almost nothing that was done in the school was in any way meant to address that. Mostly, the teachers kept doing their jobs by the numbers. And this poverty was not just economic, but emotional and spiritual. Most of the kids were profoundly unhappy. A mill town with almost no mill work left, the community life was totally broken. Most young people left after their graduation, never to return. When I did go work at the local mill, I encountered for the first time what I call “boiler room” of our consumerist, capitalistic society, what makes it all possible, and what I saw there was just as unpleasant: hard-working, sincere but sad and angry people stuck in jobs that gave their lives no meaning, just so that grocery stores could have pretty shelves for their produce. The seed of my educational philosophy, the idea schools could be more and do more, was planted in that time.

Technology In Our Schools

At the University of Maine Farmington, I met people who had made the philosophical and social leap I hadn't: they had models for schools and communities that had totally broken away from society's capitalistic, industrial and over-technologized models. The more I studied the growing role of digital technology in the classroom, and how such technology is created, the more I was skeptical and hesitant about its use. To use any digital technology in the classroom, I would be compelled to educate my students about the ethical dilemmas of its use. First of all, the minerals and metals used to build personal computers and other electronic devices primarily come from mines in the Third World, especially the Congo. The factories that produce them are typically in far eastern countries. At almost every

step, human and civil rights are violated on a massive scale, and damage to the environment is even greater. Such crimes make it possible for these products to be sold cheaply. One-to-one technology thus is made possible by, and also helps fund, our world's gravest problems. I am not opposed to digital technology in every case, but the harm it causes in a one-to-one system is far greater than its benefits. As one assistant professor of education, Lowell Monke, said, "If the task of schools is to produce men and women who live responsible, fulfilling lives-not just human cogs for the high-tech machinery of commerce-then we should not be intensifying children's high-tech existence but compensating for it."

What Will Be Taught In My Classroom?

The Common Core for social studies lays out what I find to be an excellent system not of just what should be taught, but of finding and evaluating what should be taught. It is a comparatively simple four-step process: 1. Developing a question 2. Deciding what subject area that question fits in and how we can answer that question, 3. Evaluating the evidence 4. Deciding on how to answer that question with the evidence and finally critiquing our conclusions. So, one might ask, how *do* we come up with questions in this process? The answer is in the students. If schools are meant to further our students overall happiness and general-well being, then our curriculum has to be based on what they want. Students are full of questions about the world around them, and the issues of social justice that affect them. They have questions about sex, drugs, poverty in their communities, and the violence they experience. Students are aware that they are being bombarded with extremely harmful messages about body image from the media, but being not-quite-adults,

they need our guidance. My classroom will thus seek not just to instill content knowledge, but to give them knowledge and skills that improve their emotional well-being in the context of our modern society.

Because my classroom curriculum is focused on students' issues in modern society, whether it be wealth inequality or the rights of citizenship, it is helpful to experience such phenomena first hand: at political rallies, in their own neighborhoods, public forests etc... This allows students to experience their learning face-to-face and intimately, not just a sentence they read in a book or watch in a video.

Classroom Organization

My classroom organization openly seeks to create empathy and a strong communal ethic as opposed the individualism that is usually championed in American culture. In our "normal" classroom (as opposed to the many other locales where learning will routinely occur), students sit at circular groups of four or five. Lesson plans are based on shared experiences and activities that are done during class time. An assignment that requires extensive out-of-class work time will much more closely considered. This does not however mean, that students will not be frequently speaking with other people in their community about issues being explored in class. The harmful beliefs that many students have about each other, in the form of racism, sexism and body-shaming (and that are institutionalized) are taken head-on with a social justice curriculum.

My teaching style will reflect that I am not the knower of all things or necessarily the top authority. What we learn is strongly reflected by present

circumstances: who my students are, where I am teaching, and what they may or may not already know. For example, if I were teaching an economics lesson, I might help explain the global food supply by asking the students to bring in a bottle of something they've had to drink that morning or last night. Where do agaves come from? I don't know, but in a world where I can look it up in any encyclopedia or internet-connected computer, I don't need to. One of the students might, and very likely at least will have smart-phone connected to the internet, and so we can know the answer right away. Learning is a democratic, shared process.

Discipline with Dignity

My approach to discipline and ethics is based on the humanist idea that students are fellow human beings, and thus are deserving of profound empathy and respect. Humans have a right to make their own choices, and there will be consequences for those choices, both positive and negative. Resorting to coercion or arm-twisting on the part of the teacher is a sign of failure in communication. Behavioral issues are not random or irrational. They are signs of trouble in the student's life or attempts to fulfill needs, and communicating upfront about those needs is essential to create peace and harmony in the classroom. I am not an authoritarian. I am an adult whose job is to defend everyone's human dignity from assault by others.

Aspirations

My hope is wherever I go and implement my philosophy, I will show people that are alternatives to what they've done before; *radically* different. We can have a model of education that really is about the kids, not serving the special interests of politicians

and corporations. It's a model that focuses on their questions and their happiness. I want the ideas I have learned to become infectious. The district, and hopefully larger and large sections of the community around me, would be a very different place.